

WORK IN PROGRESS

Does the body modified appearance of front-line employees matter to hotel guests?

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The hospitality industry is all about providing service. This service provision takes place in the employee and guest encounter. Hence, this interaction is crucial for the hospitality industry. The employees in this interplay are expected to represent the company and present its brand image. Next to the knowledge and skills of these service employees, the personal appearance is also important. The opinion of the guests about the quality of service is, among other things, related to the employees' appearance. Hence, companies influence the appearance of employees through grooming standards. Thus, employees are expected to engage in aesthetic labour. This form of labour was developed by the researchers Warhurst, Nickson, and Witz and is the concept of forming and developing the employee's appearance and aesthetic skills. This includes dress codes, rules for make-up, hair styling, tattoos and piercings. Moreover, in the process of selecting new staff, the employees' aesthetics are a decisive aspect. A codified appearance, however, is challenged by an increasing societal acceptance of tattoos and piercings, or so-called body modification. Wearing tattoos and piercings is no longer purely related to, for instance, sailors or artists; body modification can be seen as a form of self-expression for anybody. Consequently, the question arises how the hospitality industry reacts to this changing perspective on body modification, as it seems to contradict the idea of codifying appearance for brand image purposes. Since the guest experience and opinion on service quality is crucial for providing service, the guest opinion about being served by service staff wearing visibly tattoos and/or piercings is relevant in the discussion on how the hospitality industry can react to this phenomenon. In a descriptive, quantitative master's thesis, the perceptions of guests in hotels in Germany are investigated to contribute to the discussion about whether hospitality companies should reconsider their traditional grooming standards.

Keywords: aesthetic labour, body modification, front-line employees, guest perception, hospitality

Introduction

A few years ago, I finally decided that it was about time to get a tattoo. Full of excitement about the decision, I was looking for the perfect place on my body, which I identified as my arm or wrist. However, considering my future career in the hospitality industry, I recognised that visible tattoos might negatively influence my employment chances due to possible prejudices against tattooed people.

After working a few years in the hospitality industry, I had noticed that grooming standards forbid visible tattoos. Moreover, I had heard about friends working in the industry who faced issues regarding their tattoos. For example, during her internship, one of my friends with a small tattoo on her foot was obliged to wear black tights to cover the visible tattoo. Another friend had to cover up the tattoo on her neck with make-up as it became visible when she tied back her hair. Nevertheless, I experienced a whole different attitude towards body modification during my internship in a hotel on Aruba. Many of my colleagues, irrespective of their position, could work while showing their tattoos. It was noticeable that the people of Aruba were more open-minded towards body modification in the hospitality industry. Despite the different experiences, I realised that it might be more appropriate to place the tattoo on a part of my body not visible to others. Although I did not like this decision, it was necessary as I was

not willing to jeopardise my future employment chances in the field of hospitality.

The hospitality industry is known for its rather moderate and traditional approach regarding grooming standards (Swanger, 2006) as a proper appearance of staff is a critical success factor for professionalism in the service interaction (Ruetzler et al., 2012). Moreover, appropriate appearance includes the notion that employees represent the company's brand image (Magnini et al., 2013). Physical attractiveness is even considered to be an asset (Ruetzler et al., 2012). This focus on the physical appearance of staff is associated with the phenomenon of aesthetic labour (Tsaur & Tang, 2013). One specific aspect of aesthetic labour is body modification, defined as a permanent change of appearance, which includes permanent tattoos and removable piercings (Selekman, 2003). Visible tattoos and piercings can be seen as a detraction from a communicated brand image. Therefore, people with, for instance, tattoos that cannot be covered might face employment problems in this industry (Nickson et al., 2005; Swanger, 2006; Brallier et al., 2011; Timming et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, the question occurs whether a traditional approach towards expected staff appearance in the hospitality industry can be or needs to be continued. As tattoos and piercings have gained more popularity in society over the last years (Elzweig & Peeples, 2011), self-evident strict grooming

rules and regulations regarding body modification in the hospitality industry might be reconsidered.

Although several researchers have already examined aesthetic labour and its effects and consequences on employment from a managerial and employees' point of view, few studies can be found which focus on a customers' point of view related to aesthetic labour of front-line employees (Tsaour et al., 2015). Therefore, the aim of this study is to contribute to the discussion on body modification as part of aesthetic labour with new insights from a customer-service experience perspective.

Literature review

The literature review presents the relevant concepts and key themes of this study. The service interaction between employee and guest plays an important role in the hospitality industry, as it is part of the daily business. Furthermore, as part of the service interaction process, the experienced service quality criteria are included in this literature review. Then, the concept of aesthetic labour is introduced, as it explains the importance of appearance in the hospitality industry. Finally, the concept of body modification is included in this literature review due to its relevance for the content of this study.

Service interaction

The service interaction between employees and guests plays an important role in the daily business of the hospitality industry. This interaction defines how guests evaluate and perceive the service quality of the hospitality organisation (Hartline et al., 2003). According to Briggs et al. (2007), it is crucial for the hospitality industry to please the guest in order to strengthen the perception of the service quality provided in this interaction.

The definitions of Fitzsimmons et al. (2014) and Grönroos (2015) underline the importance of this interplay. Fitzsimmons et al. (2014) define it as the interaction between the service provider and the guest, where both have special tasks and roles to play. Classical roles of a guest in this process are the experience of the guest and the perception of the received service (Grönroos, 2015). On the other hand, Grönroos (2015, p. 48) interpreted service as

a process consisting of a series of more or less intangible activities that normally, but not necessarily always, take place in interactions between the customer and service employees and/or physical resources or goods and/or systems of the service provider, which are provided as solutions to customer problems.

Comparing the two definitions, it can be seen that Fitzsimmons et al. (2014) focused on the interplay between guest and service employee, whereas Grönroos (2015) provided a broader definition. Instead of only focusing on the interaction between employee and guest, his interpretation included systems, physical resources and goods. However, as the guests value the way in which the service is delivered and experienced (Melissen et al., 2014), the hotels focus on improving the interaction between guest and service employee (Hartline et al., 2003).

Performance of front-line employees

The performance of front-line employees is one of the most important aspects in this service interaction. The study by

Tsaour and Tang (2013) described how front-line employees are important for the relation between guest and hotel as they present the image of the company. Therefore, the perception of the organisation through the guests' eyes can be influenced by everything they do (Wilson et al., 2016). Hence, the study by Warhurst et al. (2000) showed the hotels' use of employees' "aesthetic" in interactions with guests to influence the guest's perception in the desired way.

In the hospitality industry, it is very important to understand the expectations of guests, as they base the evaluation of the perceived service quality and performance on these expectations (Wilson et al., 2016). Thus, five dimensions for quality perception were identified: reliability; assurance; responsiveness; empathy; and tangibles. In the *reliability* dimension the guest evaluates if the employee can perform the offered service dependably and precisely. Additionally, the guest expects the employee to deliver the promised service. In *assurance*, he or she concentrates on the employee's trustworthiness and the ability to create trust and certainty. The employee has to convey his or her expertise to the guest to make sure to create this feeling of trust. This is what the guest expects when judging the service quality based on the *assurance* dimension. The *responsiveness* dimension covers the professionalism of the front-line worker. The guest expects employees to respond quickly and instantly to any issues that occur as this behaviour reflects the level of professionalism of the employee.

Empathy entails the employee's ability to personalise the service and thus, if the front-line worker is an understanding and sensitive person. Even if the service is delivered and performed without issues, the guest wants to feel that the front-line worker cares about him or her. Finally, the *tangibles* dimension covers ambience and equipment of the service facility as well as the appearance and attractiveness of the employee (Wilson et al., 2016).

Compared to the five service quality dimensions, the study by Wall and Berry (2007) divided the judgemental factors of restaurant guests into three categories: functional; mechanic; and humanic.

The *functional* dimension is related to the service and food quality, *mechanic* to the ambience and technical components, and *humanic* covers the appearance, performance and behaviour of the service employee. Hence, in both divisions, one dimension or category focuses on the factor of appearance and attractiveness of the employee. Related to this factor, the study by Willis and Todorov (2006) investigated the judgment of facial attractiveness. The findings stated that facial judgement happens spontaneously and quickly. However, these results were drawn with no relation to a specific industry.

Aesthetic labour

Warhurst et al. (2000) first developed the theory of aesthetic labour in interactive service work. In their definition, this form of labour is "a supply of embodied capacities and attributes possessed by workers at the point of entry into employment" (Warhurst et al., 2000, p. 1). When practising aesthetic labour, the employers form and develop their employee's capacities and attributes into the necessary skills and competencies which are required to present a certain image to the guest. Managing the employee's appearance, i.e. using aesthetic labour, is considered a legitimate strategy related to service

quality and appeals to customers (Nickson et al., 2005). To differentiate the required skills for aesthetic labour from the existing field of hard and soft skills, a new field of skills was created: aesthetic skills (Nickson et al., 2003). Whereas hard skills include technical competencies and expertise required for the job, soft skills are defined as the people skills like communication and team work. The new field of aesthetic skills relies on the physical appearance and voice of the person (Nickson et al., 2003).

Physical attractiveness has a strong effect in social interactions, especially when dealing with customers (Tsai et al., 2012). Thus, Melissen et al. (2014) point out, by referring to the work of Albert Mehrabian (1971), the strong effects of voice and appearance compared to the words used in a human interaction. As front-line employees represent the image of the hotel (Tsaur & Tang, 2013), and business attire and grooming are identified as important factors related to professionalism (Ruetzler et al., 2012), the use of aesthetic labour in the hospitality industry becomes significant (Warhurst et al., 2000; Nickson et al., 2005). So, hotels have become aware of the opportunity to gain competitive advantage by using aesthetic labour (Warhurst et al., 2000). The study by Warhurst and Nickson (2007) indicated further that organisations use employees to “aesthetically appeal” to consumers.

Since this significance of aesthetic labour in the hospitality industry was identified, Tsaur and Tang (2013, p. 20) developed an additional definition of aesthetic labour: “the effort, control and management needed to perform organizationally desired embodied capacities and attributes for interactive service work”. Compared to the general definition by Warhurst et al. (2000), Tsaur and Tang (2013) based their definition on the hospitality industry due to the high significance of aesthetic labour in this industry. By referring to the work of Entwistle and Wissinger (2006) and Spiess and Waring (2005), the researchers pointed to the fact that employees also need to put effort into their physical appearance to perform aesthetic labour. It is important for the front-line employees to manage and control every small detail of it because appearance is often even more important in the hospitality industry than having the necessary hard skills (Warhurst et al., 2000; Nickson et al., 2005). The study by Tsaur et al. (2015) underlined this significance of the appearance and professional image of front-line employees. Customers perceived an attractive and professional appearance of employees positively, whereas the appearance only influenced the behavioural intentions of guests to a certain extent. In addition, Magnini et al. (2013) discovered that attractive front-line staff are perceived as more confident, informed and kind. Attributes considered as attractive in this study were clean-shaven men, and women with a smile. It is worth taking into consideration that the findings of Magnini et al. (2013) were limited to African-American and Caucasian front-line employees, whereas Tsaur et al. (2015) draw their conclusions in the restaurant industry in Taiwan. Additionally, the previous studies by Nickson et al. (2005), Warhurst et al. (2000), and Warhurst and Nickson (2007) based their investigations on the retail and hospitality industries in Glasgow.

To present the right image to the guest, hotels offer further training on body language and self-presentation to strengthen the employee’s aesthetic skills (Nickson et al., 2005). However, in the research by Warhurst and Nickson (2007), it was

identified that an organisation preferred to hire employees with the right appearance instead of training them. Hence, even in job advertisements companies were focused on appearance by seeking people with a “smart appearance”, who are “well spoken” or even “well presented” (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007).

Thus, job applicants were more likely judged on their aesthetic skills than on the technical competencies required for the job (Warhurst et al., 2000). The research by Nickson et al. (2005) concluded further that job applicants with aesthetic skills for customer-facing jobs had an advantage in comparison to applicants without these skills. In addition, Tsai et al., (2012) identified the relevance of attractiveness when hiring new employees. The findings indicated a preference for attractive applicants over unattractive ones. According to Ruetzler et al. (2012), the job applicant’s attractiveness had an effect on the employers’ first impression. Thus the appearance automatically influenced the perception of the employer, no matter how good the preparation of the job applicant was. However, the findings indicated that there was no difference between job applicants considered as ordinarily attractive compared to applicants with an higher than average attractiveness (Ruetzler et al., 2012).

Body modification

To define body modification, it is important to differentiate between the three concepts of body decoration: body painting; body adornment; and body modification (Selekman, 2003). Body painting, like henna tattoos, is considered a temporary method to colour the body. Additionally, body adornment is used to make the appearance more attractive with, for example, jewellery. Body modification is a widely used term and is defined as a long-lasting, extreme change and adjusting of the physical appearance (Swanger, 2006). Tattoos and piercings are included in this concept. Selekman (2003) defined tattoos as permanent with the opportunity to be placed everywhere and in every size on the body. Even if tattoos are considered permanent, it is possible to remove them to a certain extent. However, this is connected to a painful and costly process with numerous treatments necessary.

Piercings, on the other hand, are defined as less permanent due to the characteristic of being removable to a certain extent. To differentiate between earrings and piercings, Elzweig and Peebles (2011, p. 13) redrafted the term piercing into body piercing, and defined it “as a piercing anywhere in the body besides the soft spot of the earlobe”.

In recent years the popularity of body modification, especially among younger generations, has increased (Totten et al., 2009), so the possible effects of this physical modification need to be considered for a future in the hospitality industry. According to the study by Timming et al. (2017), visible body modification influenced the employment chances negatively, especially in customer-facing jobs. In most organisations, visible tattoos and piercings are not permitted (Nickson et al., 2005; Swanger 2006), as these were indicators of non-professionalism (Ruetzler et al., 2012). Thus hospitality companies based the hiring decision on employees without visible body modification (Brallier et al., 2011). Such hiring decisions are not considered illegal (Elzweig & Peebles, 2011). However, there were certain exceptions, like tattoos associated with a certain religion, which needed to be taken into consideration when making

these hiring decisions. Additionally, previous studies recognised differences comparing the likelihood of hiring male or female job applicants with visible tattoos. The study by Brallier et al. (2011) identified that tattooed females especially lost advantages in the hiring process compared to non-tattooed females. In comparison, the research by Timming et al. (2017) determined that the influence of visible tattoos on men's faces was perceived more negatively compared to tattooed women.

However, there are hotels like the W Hotels, or the Hard Rock Cafes, which are more open-minded regarding body modified employees and job applicants. In general most hotels stayed with the traditional approaches and grooming standards of the hospitality industry (Magnini et al., 2013). Nevertheless, Ruetzler et al. (2012) determined that every generation considered different appearances attractive and became more tolerant towards differences. In considering these findings, new opportunities for further research become clear.

Conclusion

The literature review has highlighted the importance of the service interaction between guest and employee in the hospitality industry. Hence, as the guests value the way in which the service is delivered and experienced, the significance of the guest's perception of the received service quality in this interaction was identified. To evaluate the service quality, the guests tend to evaluate the quality according to the five dimensions of responsiveness, reliability, assurance, empathy and tangibles. As the appearance of the employees is evaluated based on the tangibles dimension, the concept of aesthetic labour was analysed. Thus, the importance of aesthetic skills and the right appearance was determined. Moreover, related to the appearance and attractiveness of front-line employees, the concept of body modification, in the form of tattoos and piercings, was described. This concept has become more popular in society over the last years. However, several studies identified its negative effects on employment chances in the hospitality industry. This industry still prefers to hire non-tattooed job applicants, especially in customer-facing roles. Related to the concept of aesthetic labour, it was identified that employers are more likely to base hiring decisions on appearance, attractiveness and aesthetic skills, especially for front-line employees.

Despite the existing literature, there are few studies about the relationship and effects of tattooed employees on customer perceptions in the service encounter. Hence, this work-in-progress research aims to explore these aspects by considering the identified key themes of body modification related to aesthetic labour and the service interaction in the hospitality industry.

Main themes to explore

The concepts of service interaction, aesthetic labour and body modification are identified as key themes of this study and are explored further. Based on these themes, a conceptual model (Figure 1) was created.

The model illustrates the connection between the appearances of front-line employees in the service encounter in the form of body modification with the guest perception in combination with the service quality dimensions in the

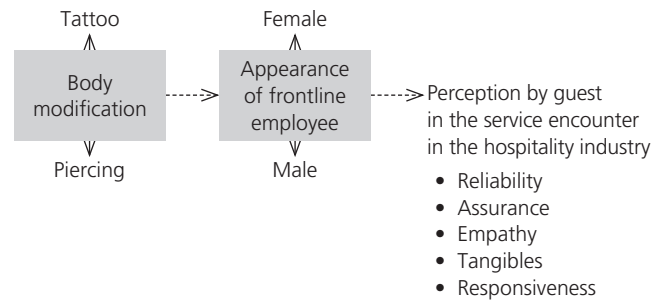


Figure 1: Conceptual model

hospitality industry. In this study, the quality dimensions are used as a framework to measure the first impression of the guest perception of body modified front-line employees. Hence, based on the conceptual model, this research aims to investigate to what extent the body modified appearance of male and female front-line employees influences the first impression of guests' perception of service quality in the hospitality industry. As the model already indicates, the concept of body modification is divided into tattoos and piercings to evaluate the differences between these two factors. Furthermore, as the literature review has identified, a possible gender difference will be considered. To determine the aspects presented in the conceptual model, the data will be collected through a factorial experimental design with surveys based on factors like tattoo, piercing, gender, and age. The surveys will be distributed among guests in hotels in Germany.

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